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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000003

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [OSCE](#) [KPAO](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: ARMENIAN PRESIDENCY OPPOSES EXIT POLL FOR
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

REF: A) YEREVAN 1467 B) YEREVAN 1439

Classified By: CDA JPENNINGTON, REASONS 1.4 B/D.

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During a lengthy, back-and-forth discussion, President Kocharian's Chief of Staff and senior aide conveyed the president's opposition to the exit poll proposed by USAID for the February presidential election. Asking the Mission to understand, and not politicize the president's request to forego the poll, the officials enumerated the administration's numerous concerns. These included a lack of trust in the poll's administration, fear that it could jeopardize political stability, and a concern that the poll would overshadow the election process itself. The Charge d'Affaires disagreed with the Presidency's assessment, regretted the decision to oppose the exit poll, and cautioned that it could send the wrong signal about GOAM stated commitments to democratic reforms. He noted that while the Mission would not hold the poll if it was not welcomed, it would eventually have to go public with the reason why. End summary.

POLL "NOT WELCOMED AT ALL"

¶2. (C) At the request of the Presidency, the Charge d'Affaires on December 28 met with presidential Chief of Staff Armen Gevorgian and presidential aide Vigen Sargsyan, to discuss the USAID-funded exit poll commissioned by IRI for the February 19 presidential election. USAID's acting director, democracy programs chief, and acting polchief accompanied the Charge to the meeting which was held at the Presidency. The meeting was the third held on the subject within the space of three weeks, all at the request of the Presidency, after Prime Minister (and presidential front-runner) Serzh Sargsyan publicly supported the exit poll. While the Presidency has remained publicly silent about the poll, in private it has stridently opposed it (reftels), and criticized the Mission for not consulting it first before broaching the idea with the Prime Minister. (Note: The Mission raised the issue peripherally during a late November meeting with the PM that addressed other issues, and was pleasantly surprised that he went immediately public with his support right after the meeting. End note.)

¶3. (C) Exhibiting a highly suspicious attitude toward the

exit poll, the officials expressed at length the presidential administration's concerns, noting that "the president does not welcome it at all." While showing appreciation for U.S. election assistance in general, Gevorgian nevertheless attacked the poll, which he viewed as "a political tool" whose methodology and administration inspired little confidence. The officials said the specter of an exit poll "commissioned by one country" and "conducted by a private organization of a third country" would open the door to additional requests from other countries with "different political agendas." Sargsyan noted that "chaos" would ensue, and Armenian sovereignty would be threatened, if Armenia were to go down this path. (Note: The reference to a private organization of a third country is attributed to the fact that IRI commissioned the Baltic Surveys, Ltd. / Gallup Organization in Vilnius to conduct the poll. End note.)

14. (C) Gevorgian repeatedly emphasized the lack of trust that the administration had in the poll's methodology and conduct, and the fact that the GOAM was not invited to participate in carrying it out. Focusing in on the possibility of fraud in the collection of polling data, its electronic transmission to Vilnius, and its analysis by foreigners there, Gevorgian said Armenia was "not guilty" in turning down the poll. He also had concerns that Gallup could not share polling data broken down by precinct after the poll. (Comment: In a December 19 meeting at the Presidency, the Embassy and USAID invited IRI and Gallup to explain the poll's methodology to Sargsyan and other officials. During that meeting, none of these officials directly asked that the GOAM be allowed to participate in the polling process. So Gevorgian's repeated emphasis that Gallup had rejected GOAM entreaties to participate should be viewed as political posturing. End comment.)

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NO "SOUND SLEEP" ON ELECTION NIGHT

15. (C) Trotting out the same argument from the December 19 meeting, Sargsyan iterated that the poll could result in political instability, claiming people would not get a "sound sleep" on election night if official and exit poll results diverged. He said "one to three bad apples" could tamper with the poll and put Armenian sovereignty to the test. Gevorgian chimed in and said a botched poll could even jeopardize the ten years of accomplishments under Kocharian, listing democracy, development, and stability. Gevorgian expounded at length on an episode of the 2003 presidential election, in which the OSCE charged in its post-election report that vote fraud had occurred in a particular district where the OSCE did not even have observers present. Alleging the episode unfairly tarnished the elections, Gevorgian said "we do not want to repeat" the situation when it comes to the exit poll.

16. (C) The officials also repeatedly stressed that the exit poll risked overshadowing the "real" task at hand, the electoral process itself. Drawing a distinction between the two, they said the legal complications that could result from the exit poll, in a country that had "no tradition" of exit polls, could harm the entire electoral process. Sargsyan returned to his contention that the exit poll could not be challenged in court, and both alleged that since the exit poll had no legal basis in Armenian law, the GOAM would not feel any accountability regarding its results. Gevorgian further noted that exit polls were not a component of international agreements on election assistance with Armenia, and Sargsyan said Armenia did not need exit polls to "validate" its election results.

PLEASE DON'T POLITICIZE DECISION

17. (C) Gevorkian asked the Charge not to publicize or politicize the president's opposition to the poll. Appealing to the Embassy to try to understand the GOAM's perspective, he hoped the Mission would maintain a low profile on the topic until he had one final meeting with President Kocharian on the subject, and after the president eventually made his views public. At that point, Gevorkian said it would be natural for the Embassy to air its own position. He added that the president planned to meet with foreign ambassadors in January, where he would explain his position on the exit poll to the diplomatic community. Sargsyan then hinted that the GOAM would review electoral legislation after the election to preclude foreign sponsorship of exit polls in the future.

CHARGE'S RESPONSE

18. (C) The Charge disagreed with the characterization of the exit poll as a political tool, said the poll was proposed in good faith, and stressed it would increase the credibility of the election results in Armenian eyes, and abroad. He pointed out to Gevorkian that the GOAM (and the President) was missing an opportunity to demonstrate greater transparency in the election process, and publicly demonstrate its stated commitments to democratic reforms. He also previewed a letter from MCC President Ambassador Danilovich to Kocharian which noted the importance of a clean election for the continuation of Armenia's MCC Compact. He noted that while the Mission would not hold the poll if it were not welcomed, it would eventually have to be honest with the media when asked about why the idea had been nixed.

COMMENT

19. (C) This decision was disappointing, but not unexpected. The posturing over the lack of GOAM participation is a fig leaf concealing the president's distrust of the exit poll, a distrust we find puzzling given the fact he's stepping down after two terms and his hand-picked successor enjoys a credible double-digit lead over his next closest rival. We suspect the Presidency will now use this "non-participation"

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line publicly to explain Kocharian's opposition to the idea. Given the Prime Minister's public enthusiasm for the poll, it will also be interesting to observe his private and public reactions to the president's contradicting decision. The election process has willy-nilly revealed the contrast in operating styles -- and apparently in confidence levels -- of both leaders. The exit poll issue has crystallized these differences, and suggests that the perceived political interests of the PM and President have started to diverge.
PENNINGTON